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Abstract

The crisis of 2009 has not proved to be a great impetus for new critical redirection of political and economic thinking in the West: both politico-economic structures in the West and the models of development and democratisation at the heart of Western foreign policy agendas remain much the same. This is despite the continued efforts of critical and philosophical IR theorists to push 'critical thinking' and 'alternative agendas' in world politics. Why the dismal 'real-world' failure of critical and philosophical IR research? This piece reflects on the trends towards depoliticisation, fragmentation and de-concretisation of critical and philosophical IR research and suggests some potential ways forward in reorienting critical and philosophical research in the field.

Keywords

critical theory, IR theory, theory–practice nexus

It is a sign of the times that while dissatisfaction with the political and economic structures of society is rife, academic criticism of the politico-economic system we live in, and which is simultaneously promulgated by our foreign policy machines around the world, is surprisingly impotent and ineffective. The excesses of the liberal capitalist developmental blueprint received a minor 'rap on the wrists' by the crisis of 2009, but nevertheless the structure and the external policies of market democracies around the world remain much the same. If the end of the Cold War is supposed to have 'ended history', disappointingly it is the 2009 crisis that seems to be a more telling sign of the end of history; it shows that no real 'ideational' alternative seems to exist to global capitalism as a model of growth or to the ideals of liberal market democratisation as a way of expanding the sphere of freedom. The left and other radical politico-economic models

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are on the wane as authoritarian capitalism presents, it seems, the most viable challenge to the hegemony of liberal market democracy.

This pessimism on the question of progressive alternative politics at a time of crisis stems from my recent research, the aim of which has been to interrogate whether room exists for alternative politico-economic visions in today's democracy assistance. In its initial stages, this research was driven by an optimistic belief in the power of critical theory to generate new and important avenues for rethinking the deeply consequential policy practice of democracy assistance. Yet, worries have appeared about such prospects. One is that it has become evident (somewhat unsurprisingly) that room for critical interventions in policy practice is fairly limited. A far more worrying issue, however, is the observation that critical theory is increasingly lacking in relevance in contributing to the revitalisation of policy practice or perceptive critiques of it. This is because of the abstract and theory-driven nature of critical theory and its lack of realistic understanding as to how to challenge the dominance of hegemonic ideas in today's foreign policy practice. As Richard Youngs has argued in relation to critical theoretical investigations of democracy support, critical theorists today are dangerously behind the curve on policy practices and theoretically obsessed with critiques of little use to practitioners.¹ It really is rather disappointing for – and a disappointing symptom of – alternative, or so-called 'critical', thinking in the social sciences that even when the problems of the dominant model are evident, there is no real systematic, effective or realistic opposition to it.

Why is there such a dearth of successful or influential 'critical' thinking even in the relatively 'fruitful' context of multiple social and economic crises? This is a big question, requiring, for an adequate treatment, a holistic sociological study conducted on multiple levels of analysis of society. Nothing of this nature can be attempted here, but we can, and arguably should, on the 40th anniversary of *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* – one of the leading critical theory journals in International Relations (IR) – reflect on some of the key trends in critical and philosophical research in IR, with the hope that this might reveal something characteristic of wider trends. With this in mind, I reflect on the prospects of critical theoretical analysis in IR and, in so doing, hope to add a new angle (or rather reintroduce an old angle) to assessment of critical theory's role in IR. Despite many excellent reviews of the development and fortunes of critical and philosophical research in IR,² few have analysed in detail the curious depoliticising and

1. Richard Youngs, 'Misunderstanding the Maladies of Liberal Democracy Promotion', in *Conceptual Politics of Democracy Promotion*, eds Christopher Hobson and Milja Kurki (London: Routledge, forthcoming). See also Richard Youngs, *The EU's Role in World Politics: A Retreat from Liberal Internationalism* (London: Routledge, 2010).
2. Richard Wyn Jones, 'Introduction: Locating Critical International Relations Theory', in *Critical Theory and World Politics*, ed. Richard Wyn Jones (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001), 1–23; Andrew Linklater, 'The Question of the Next Stage in International Relations Theory: A Critical-Theoretical Point of View', *Millennium* 21, no. 1 (1992): 77–98; Andrew Linklater, 'The Changing Contours of Critical International Relations Theory', in *Critical Theory and World Politics*, ed. Richard Wyn Jones (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001), 23–43; Mark Neufeld, 'Reflexivity and International Relations Theory', *Millennium* 22, no. 1 (1993): 53–76; Chris Brown, 'Turtles All the Way Down: Anti-foundationalism, Critical Theory and International Relations', *Millennium* 23, no. 2 (1994): 213–36; Thomas Biersteker, 'Critical Reflections on Post-Positivism in International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1989): 263–7;

fragmentation-oriented trends afflicting critical theory and associated forms of philosophical analysis today. Also, few analysts have dared to openly comment on the striking failures of critical theory to bring about or facilitate progressive change in today's world political environment. It is my aim here to open the discussion towards a more (self-) critical analysis of critical theory in IR.

We must of course note at the outset that it might be somewhat unrealistic to expect critical theory to directly contribute towards a better world 'out there'. As Herbert Marcuse pointed out, critical theory 'possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between present and its future; holding no promise and showing no success, it remains negative'.³ Yet, this is not the only interpretation of the role of critical theory. Indeed, I argue that critical and philosophical theorising in IR can and should be reunified, re-concretised and re-politicised. I suggest that not only were philosophical and critical theoretical strands more closely connected to each other in the past, they also had much greater interest in bringing philosophical and critical reflections to bear on real-world political developments. It is these trends we need to recapture in order to resist the increasing structural and disciplinary pulls towards conformism and conservatism, even among critical theorists. At present, as academic professionalisation, disciplinisation and fragmentation take effect, philosophical debates in IR are increasingly depoliticised and abstract and critical theory increasingly offers many divergent but internally rather insular theoretical visions. I suggest that the 'academic success' of philosophical and theoretical agendas, or their increasing diversity, is not *necessarily* progressive in IR, nor emancipatory for the world at large.⁴

This article will proceed in three steps. Firstly, I ask: is there a dearth of critical and philosophical research in IR? As the first section of this article shows, the answer is 'no': some of the most famous and productive authors today are critical and philosophical theorists. Yet, I also point out some worrying trends in these literatures. Not only is philosophical research increasingly removed from critical theory, but critical theory itself is becoming fragmented. Also, as is evident from the lack of change in the international sphere, the critical theoretical research does not seem to be particularly effective in imparting critical knowledge or change on society. The reasons for the movement towards depoliticisation, fragmentation and poor effectiveness are pondered in the next section. I suggest here that the failures of critical theory could originate from many causes. They could be suggestive of failures of critical thinking per se. Alternatively, the problems may be disciplinary, structural or strategic. I argue that a hegemonic set of forces in academia and in society at large may be successful in hindering and silencing the critical edge of philosophical and theoretical work in IR. This contributes to a set of strategic failures in critical theorists' engagements with concrete political practice. In the third section, I argue that to address the praxaeological failures

Mark Hoffman, 'Critical Theory and the Inter-paradigm Debate', *Millennium* 16, no. 2 (1987): 231–49.

3. Herbert Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man* (London: Routledge, 1964), 281.

4. Craig Murphy, 'Critical Theory and the Democratic Impulse: Understanding a Century-old Tradition', in *Critical Theory and World Politics*, ed. Richard Wyn Jones (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001), 61–75; Brian Schmidt, 'International Relations Theory: Hegemony or Pluralism?', *Millennium* 36 (2008): 295–310.

not only should academics seek closer interaction with real-world political struggles⁵ – perhaps most urgently in challenging the dominant forms of positivism in global governance practice today – but also that, through various slight reorientations in theorising, critical and philosophical interventions in IR can be re-politicised, brought back closer together and reinvigorated.

Critical and Philosophical Knowledge in IR: The State of Play

Let us not deceive ourselves. The vast majority of scholarship in international relations (and the social sciences for that matter) proceeds without conscious reflection on its philosophical bases or premises.⁶

This assessment by Thomas Biersteker in 1989 would surely shock many in the discipline of IR today. It would seem as if most theorists now do actively reflect on their own philosophical presuppositions, and that some of them, in fact, do so rather excessively.⁷ Yet, this development is a hard-gained one, and a positive one. What is, again, the significance of the increased acceptance of the importance of philosophical reflection in the study of world politics?

Philosophical reflection is about gaining understanding of how knowledge is generated and structured and what its relationship is to its producer, their social context and society at large. It is about understanding the role and structure of scientific or social knowledge: how it is constructed; what objects exist in its purview; and why and how we do (or do not) come to know our objects in specific ways. This might seem a rather abstract interest; and indeed, for many, ‘meta-theoretical’ or ‘philosophy of science’ research remains a rather abstract theoretical sub-field narrowly engaged in detailed debates on epistemology, causation or prediction. Philosophically informed IR research can, however, be much more than this.

Indeed, for many of its promulgators, philosophical research has arguably been a very politically and socially important, as well as potentially influential, field of study. While most philosophically inclined analysts acknowledge that meta-theory is not everything in IR, most argue it is of crucial significance in the discipline.⁸ This is because it shapes in crucial ways how we come to understand the world, evaluate claims about it and, indeed, interact with it. Depending on whether we are a positivist or a post-structuralist, we seek different kinds of data, ask different kinds of questions and come to engage with actors differently in ‘international politics’ (which is also conceived of in different ways).⁹ To use Patrick Jackson’s language: philosophical wagers matter.¹⁰

5. Murphy, ‘Critical Theory’.

6. Biersteker, ‘Critical Reflections’, 265.

7. William Wallace, ‘Truth and Power, Monks and Technocrats: Theory and Practice in International Relations’, *Review of International Studies* 22, no. 3 (1996): 301–21.

8. Fred Chernoff, *The Power of International Theory: Reforging the Link to Foreign Policy Making through Scientific Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 2005); Colin Wight, *Structure and Agency in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Milja Kurki, ‘Critical Realism and Causal Analysis’, *Millennium* 35, no. 2 (2007): 361–78; Richard Wyn Jones, ‘Introduction’.

9. Milja Kurki and Colin Wight, ‘International Relations as Social Science’, in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, eds Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1–33; Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

10. Patrick T. Jackson, *Social Inquiry in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2011).

Philosophical research is not only of significance in IR scholarship, of course. It is worth remembering that some of the most well-known philosophers of science had at the heart of their inquiries questions of values and politics. Thus, Popper and Kuhn, for example, were socially and politically driven philosophers of science; and sought through their philosophical frameworks to influence the interaction of scientific practice and societal power structures.¹¹ The same stands for logical positivists in the social sciences. Biersteker describes this well:

European and American scholars embraced logical positivist, scientific behavioralism in the post-war era in part as a reaction against fascism, militarism, and communism. They were reacting against totalizing ideologies and sought a less overtly politicized philosophical basis for their research. Their liberalism stressed toleration for everything except totalizing ideologies, and their logical positivist scientific approaches provided what they viewed as a less politicized methodology for the conduct of social research.¹²

Murphy's detailed study of the rise of behaviouralist peace studies confirms the same; the rise, in a specific context, of a specific type of meta-theoretical argumentation, which is deployed to a social and, in fact, 'political' effect in order to criticise recent social dynamics and to change the world in a preferable direction.¹³ There is, even when it is sidestepped by scientists or philosophers themselves (as in the case of behaviouralists), a 'politics' to the philosophy of science, in the sense that meta-theoretical concerns are tied up with concrete social and political debates and struggles and specific normative and political visions of both science and society, even if in indirect ways.¹⁴

This 'political' edge of philosophical debate has not been absent in IR scholarship, and arguably it was precisely the political role of philosophies of science that critical international theory was 'invented' to deal with. It is important to bear in mind that when meta-theory emerged as an important sphere of study within IR theorising in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was moved to the centre ground of IR research by a selection of key critical thinkers who politicised this area. Cox, Ashley, Ashley and Walker, Hoffman, Linklater and Steve Smith,¹⁵ for example, argued vehemently in favour of the necessity for IR to consider its philosophy of science underpinnings because of the political effects that epistemological and ontological decisions IR theorists make have on

11. Steve Fuller, *Struggle for the Soul of Science: Popper vs Kuhn* (New York: Longman, 2005).

12. Biersteker, 'Critical Reflections', 266.

13. Murphy, 'Critical Theory'.

14. Milja Kurki, 'The Politics of the Philosophy of Science', *International Theory* 1, no. 3 (2009): 440–54.

15. Robert Cox, 'Social Forces, States and World Order: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 126–55; Richard Ashley, 'Political Realism and Human Interests', *International Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (1981): 221–26; Richard Ashley and R.J.B. Walker, eds, 'Speaking the Language of Exile: Dissidence in International Studies', Special Issue of *International Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1990); Hoffman, 'Critical Theory'; Mark Hoffman, 'Conversations on Critical International Relations Theory', *Millennium* 17, no. 1 (1988): 91–6; Andrew Linklater, *Men and Citizens in International Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1981); Steve Smith, 'Rearranging the Deckchairs on the Ship Called Modernity: Rosenberg, Epistemology and Emancipation', *Millennium* 23, no. 2 (1994): 395–405; Steve Smith, 'Singing our World into Existence: International Relations Theory and September 11: Presidential Address to the International Studies Association, February 27, 2003', *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (2004): 499–51.

their concrete research and resultant policy proposals. Indeed, in a famous line, Steve Smith called his epistemological work the most political of his career.¹⁶

Similar lines of argument were floated by the feminists at the time. Indeed, on the pages of *Millennium*, for example, various arguments were advanced for the need to re-engage with the way in which IR produces knowledge and how this ties to power structures in world politics as well as in the discipline.¹⁷ In IR too, then, there was a powerful *political and normative* edge to introducing meta-theoretical or philosophical debates. Sometimes this was made more explicit, other times it remained less so;¹⁸ yet arguably the motivation for the extension of philosophical frameworks for thinking about knowledge was political; and the rise of post-positivism was a consequence in many regards of the rise of critical theorising in the discipline. It is not accidental that the rise of post-structuralism, feminism and historical materialism coincided with the increased interest in the philosophy of science or meta-theory; these developments fed each other in a very powerful way.¹⁹ This is because the aim of early critical theorists was shared by meta-theorists and vice versa: the joint aim was to challenge uncritical positivism and, thereby, the political dominance of positivist and liberal/conservative strands of thought in IR by replacing them with a more epistemologically reflective or pluralist set of orientations.²⁰ Indeed, as Neufeld pointed out, 'it is at the level of meta-theory that some of the most important insights have been achieved in recent years to restructure IR theory in a more critical direction'.²¹ Crucially, challenging the philosophical principles of a positivist philosophy of science was the first step in the critical theory challenge to IR scholarship and thereby the power structures in world politics that supported these ideals. This of course drew from the much politicised critique of positivism advanced by the original critical theorists: for Frankfurt School theorists, it is worth reminding ourselves, positivism was a *real-world societal and political problem*, not just an abstract philosophy of science of little impact to structure and mindsets of modern industrial polities.²²

Among the positivists, the critical theorists' attempted challenge was denounced as 'lacking a clear research programme'²³ in Keohane's words; but it also was supported by many who had been influenced by and sought to defend the pluralism engendered in the

16. Steve Smith, 'Power and Truth: A Reply to William Wallace', *Review of International Studies* 23, no. 4 (1997): 507–16.

17. See, for example, *Millennium*, vols 16 and 17. See also Mark Hoffman, 'Critical Voices in a Mainstream Local: *Millennium*, the LSE International Relations Department and the Development of International Theory', in *International Relations at LSE: A History of 75 years*, eds H. Bauer and E. Brighi (London: Millennium Publishing, 2003), 139–74.

18. Steve Smith's work is very instructive here; he argued for a pluralist position on theoretical frameworks both openly and implicitly, perhaps most famously in his collaboratively written book with Martin Hollis.

19. Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit, 'Dangerous Liaisons? Critical International Theory and Constructivism', *European Journal of International Relations* 4, no. 3 (1998): 259–294; Richard Wyn Jones, 'Introduction'.

20. Hoffman, 'Critical Theory'; Brown, 'Turtles'; Mark Neufeld, 'Who's Afraid of Meta-theory?', *Millennium* 23, no. 2 (1994): 387–94; Justin Rosenberg, 'The International Imagination: IR and 'Classical Social Analysis'', *Millennium* 23, no. 1 (1994): 85–108.

21. Neufeld, 'Who's Afraid', 389.

22. Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man*.

23. Robert O. Keohane, 'International Institutions: Two Approaches', in *International Theory: Critical Investigations*, ed. James Der Derian (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995).

discipline by the post-positivist and interpretivist trends.²⁴ Yet, most if not all advocates and critics openly seemed to accept that there was a ‘politics’ to the philosophy of science onslaught in the discipline; and this politics was transformative and ‘critical’ in nature. Hence, in part, the many slurs that IR critical theorists were but idealistic ‘philosophes’ in their ‘ivory towers’.²⁵

Yet, many shifts have taken place in the framing of both critical theory and philosophy of science debates in IR since. Indeed, despite the rise to dominant positions of critical and meta-theoretical researchers in the field – just think of most key professors in the United Kingdom (the London School of Economics and Political Science, Aberystwyth, Sheffield), continental Europe (e.g. European University Institute, Science-Po) or even in the United States (Ohio, Berkeley) – the trends in the critical theory and meta-theory fields could be seen as in some regards degenerative. As the next section will examine, there has been a rise in professionalisation, but also concomitant to it in the specialisation, fragmentation, depoliticisation and de-concretisation of both critical theory and philosophical research.

Trends towards Depoliticising Philosophy and Fragmentation of the Knowledge Basis

These trends arguably started with constructivism. What constructivism did was to take up the basic assumptions of the so-called post-positivist research currents. However, it did so without the edge of critical thinking whom motivated the historical materialists, Marxists or feminists – all of whom are clearly also broadly ‘constructivist’ in their epistemological and ontological outlook.²⁶ Whom is interesting of course is that it was constructivism – not historical materialism or feminism – that came to fill the gap that developed between mainstream positivism’s insistence on science and critical theorists’ attacks on their crude methods. It was constructivism that became the leading edge of interpretivist or post-positivist IR research. This was arguably because constructivism provides a particularly palatable form of post-positivist philosophy of science,²⁷ and crucially removes from it political and ideological leanings (or commitments) to critical aims of emancipation or structural transformation. Constructivism was ‘critical theory light’, although in many cases rather ‘meta-theory heavy’. It could deal with the subtleties of meta-theoretical argumentation, as Wendt’s, Kratochwil’s and Onuf’s contributions so well attest;²⁸ but it did so without advocating a specific *critical* theory, and indeed without having to directly face up to the political nature of all constructivist (as well as positivist)

24. Hollis and Smith, *Explaining and Understanding*; Neufeld, ‘Reflexivity’; Neufeld, ‘Who’s Afraid’.

25. Wallace, ‘Truth and Power’.

26. Colin Hay, *Political Analysis: A Critical Introduction* (London: Palgrave, 2002).

27. Andreas Bieler and Adam Morton, ‘The Deficits of Discourse in IPE: Turning Base Metal into Gold?’, *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2008): 103–28; Milja Kurki and Adriana Sinclair, ‘Hidden in Plain Sight: Constructivist Treatment of Social Context and Limitations’, *International Politics* 47, no. 1 (2010): 1–25.

28. Alex Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Friedrich Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Nicholas Onuf, *World of Our Making* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

knowledge claims. Constructivism then emerged as the non-political (or liberal) version of the post-positivist/critical theory turns; an epistemological turn without transformative critical politics.

It is not only constructivism that is to blame for the disassociation of philosophical analysis and critical theory. Philosophers of science, as much as critical theorists, are to blame as well. Much of the blame lies with philosophers of science in IR. Directed by the puzzles framed by Hollis and Smith and others,²⁹ a whole generation of IR scholars have delved into detailed examination of the intricacies of philosophical argumentation. This, of course, was valuable and productive for these authors themselves, and, in so far as such arguments were poorly discussed in IR in the past, made also a contribution of a kind to the discipline and its knowledge base. Thus, it is not insignificant, for example, that the insights of critical reflexivity have been discussed in IR,³⁰ nor that the challenges posed by critical realism to both positivism and interpretivism are discussed in detail.³¹ These major philosophical interventions have played an important role in educating IR scholars of the consequentiality of underlying (and often taken-for-granted) assumptions for concrete research.

Yet, much of this research (including my own work) has followed the lead of constructivist authors in that it has come to increasingly separate the political edge of critical thinking from philosophy of science or meta-theoretical argumentations. Thus, the critical realists now rarely acknowledge the Marxist origins and sympathies of this philosophical strand of thought and pragmatists stay silent on this strand's origins in liberal political thought. Even the post-structuralists, for whom identifying hidden politics stands at the heart of social inquiry, sometimes fail to openly admit and reflect on the political consequences of their own predilections. Much emphasis is placed on analyses of the nature and role of philosophical or linguistic frameworks; less is spent on reflecting on political leanings of theoretical musings, whether radical or conservative. Specialisation in meta-theoretical inquiry has brought an interest in a rather narrow and 'technical' set of philosophical questions at the expense of broader political questions embedded in philosophical analysis.

Furthermore, and crucially, critical theory itself is becoming increasingly fragmented. The original aims of critical theorising, which called for holistic forms of theoretical inquiry that merged normative, explanatory and praxaeological inquiries, are now increasingly dissipating. Normative theory has become a sphere of inquiry of its own, while many explanatory interests are dealt with by the neo-Gramscians. Neither camp develops systematic praxaeological interventions in current world politics. Indeed, it is important to note that the latter of these three agendas is the one that has suffered most in such fragmentation of agendas into distinct analytical spheres of inquiry.³²

29. Hollis and Smith, *Explaining and Understanding*; Wight, *Structures and Agents*; Chernoff, *The Power*; Hidemi Suganami, *The Causes of War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Wendt, *Social Theory*; Heikki Patomaki, *After International Relations: Critical Realism and World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2002).

30. Neufeld, 'Reflexivity'.

31. Heikki Patomaki and Colin Wight, 'After Post-positivism: The Promises of Critical Realism', *International Studies Quarterly* 44 (2001): 213–37; Nivien Saleh, 'Philosophical Pitfalls: The Methods Debate in American Political Science', *Journal of Integrated Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2009): 141–76.

32. I am grateful to Mark Hoffman for clarifying this point.

Also, much debate now takes place within very specific orientations and with theoretical, rather than more generalist, political interests in focus. Thus, many of the rich writings on critical theory in IR are now focused on the exploration of the methodological and theoretical consequences of Foucauldian, Bhaskarian or Bourdieuan frameworks; less emphasis is placed on exploring the politics (sometimes contradictory politics) of these authors, what these might mean for practical political programmes and how these agendas may speak to each other in productive and politically concrete ways. Indeed, not only do many critical and philosophical researchers remain distinctly silent in terms of their own politics – since the politics of their philosophical stances do not concern them³³ – but also the politics of the ‘open-front’ fight against positivism, once central to critical theorists, is not a core concern either. Fighting positivism or a common ‘unreflective’ enemy is no longer an exercise that concerns critical theorists of various camps. Nor is identification of positivism as a problem ‘out there’ an issue as interests become more and more theoretically focused and abstract. As a result, critical theory and meta-theory are not only increasingly disassociated, but also increasingly fragmented themselves. The post-structuralists engage in their own studies, the feminists speak to themselves and the critical realists are ignored by everyone. Little constructive discussion across these specialisms takes place, despite the efforts by some, for example, Wyn Jones, Rengger and Thirkell-White, and Edkins and Vaughn-Williams,³⁴ to bring different strands of critical theory closer together. This fragmentation is augmented by the rather distinct developmental paths of critical theorising among different subdisciplines of IR: IPE, IR theory and security studies, for example, have developed rather distinct trajectories in their engagement with critical theory.

What are we to make of all of this? Why is there a fragmentation of knowledge and effort in the field, and how does this relate to or contribute to the wider structural constraints on critical theorising?

Problems of Critical Theory: Disciplinarity, Hegemony, Strategies?

Why has there been a turn towards abstraction, specialisation, fragmentation, depoliticisation and, as a result, de-concretisation in critical contributions in IR? Many possible reasons coexist. Some might say it is a rather natural development for a theoretical approach to ‘fragment’ and ‘dissolve’: as critical theory succeeds in the discipline, natural disagreements within it are exposed in a destructive fashion. A common alternative explanation for critical theory’s failures among many mainstream thinkers would be that critical theorists’ empirical analyses are imprecise and passé as their methods are too general and sloppy to contribute clear-cut well-informed critical analysis. Indeed, in my own current field of study, democracy promotion, one key commentator, Richard Youngs,

33. Chernoff, *The Power*; Suganami, *Causes*; Jackson, *Social Inquiry*; Nuno Monteiro and Keven Ruby, ‘IR and the False Promise of Philosophical Foundations’, *International Theory* 1, no. 1 (2009): 15–48; Saleh, ‘Philosophical Pitfalls’.

34. Richard Wyn Jones, ‘Introduction’; Nick Rengger and T.B. Thirkell-White, *Still Critical after All These Years?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Jenny Edkins and Nick Vaughan-Williams, eds, *Critical Theorists and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2009).

has recently argued precisely this about the failures of critical theory analysis of democracy promotion – with some justification.³⁵ Yet, other reasons should also be considered – deeper reasons which might explain in part the problems that critical theorists have in analysis of the world political trends today. I consider here three (no doubt deeply intertwined) sets of reasons: disciplinary, structural and strategic.

Professionalisation of Disciplines

For some time now, various commentators, often critical theorists themselves, have pointed to the power of social forces in scientific disciplines in structuring the nature of fields and their internal debates. One of the most significant facets of such forces can be seen in the professionalisation of disciplines whereby advocates of specific stances come to assume a role in the discipline, which confines the nature of their interests as well as their dynamics of interaction with others. One of the most important mechanisms of socialisation are journals, but also tenure.³⁶ What is significant to note is that in recent decades philosophers of science and critical theorists have both been very successful in gaining for themselves positions within academia, and have in many cases risen to become leaders of the field, or at least in their specific theoretical field. While complaints remain about the patriarchal or mainstream-friendly nature of the discipline's central journals or departments, it is also an incontrovertible fact that many critical theorists and meta-theorists have assumed very powerful positions within IR research – some might suggest *at the expense* of (the supposedly dominant) empirical scientists.³⁷ Certainly, in the UK, no longer is it viable for feminists, post-structuralists or philosophers of science to say that key IR journals or departments do not tolerate their work.

Yet, at the same time, it may also be that the nature of critical theory work has changed as a result of this rise to academic echelons of power. As a result of 'joining the academic power structure', inevitably socialisation pressures also increasingly affect the critical social scientists. Thus, leadership roles in IR departments, Research Assessment Exercise³⁸ concerns and pressures to enter the research funding game increasingly impinge on these critical and philosophical theorists, affecting, arguably, the nature of their work. Now while I am not suggesting that these authors (or I) simply bow down to the pressures of states and funding councils to come up with 'mainstream' fundable work, I think it is fair to say that tendencies towards specialisation of knowledge and an output-oriented outlook are consequences of these pressures. Critical theorists may not experience the same pressure towards instrumental policy-oriented research, but in the

35. Richard Youngs, 'Misunderstanding the Maladies of Liberal Democracy Promotion', in *Conceptual Politics of Democracy Promotion*, eds Christopher Hobson and Milja Kurki (London: Routledge, 2011).

36. Ole Waever, 'Still a Discipline after All These Debates?', in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, eds Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 297–316.

37. John J. Mearsheimer, 'E.H. Carr vs. Idealism: The Battle Rages On', *International Relations* 19, no. 2 (2005): 139–52; John J. Mearsheimer, 'The More Isms the Better', *International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2005): 354–59; Schmidt, 'International Relations Theory'.

38. This involves the external assessment and ranking of research outputs of academics and constitutes not only a key instrument of financial allocation for universities in the UK, but also a key measure of the prestige and market position of departments.

case of philosophical and theoretical work, increasingly narrowly defined and fragmented fields of theoretical specialism are called for as a result of the way in which disciplinary structures of prestige and funding function. The branding of critical theorists as experts on specific authors or theoretical strands, and the concomitant pressures to develop theoretically original contributions through detailed study and interpretation of specific strands of thought or concepts, reinforce narrow specialisms and tendencies towards non-applied critical theorising (rather than 'generic' critical theory that is applied and seeks to, in concrete contexts, initiate change and overcome theoretical myopia).

In the era of the market-led university, little public money exists for non-instrumentally driven generic critical thinking. As a result, little incentive exists to put critical theoretical or philosophical insights together with political critiques of specific practices of world order in order to produce praxeological research aimed at the restructuring of social and political spaces. Such research is likely to be shunned both in academia (where theoretical expertise is valued) and research councils (where 'practical' and instrumental, rather than politically emancipatory, insights tend to be valued). As a result of the pressures placed upon academics in a market-led university, he or she has little else option but to play the game: publish (to research assessment standards), excel at leading in a specific (and increasingly narrow) subject area and, if possible, project-manage. The result is depoliticisation of research and fragmentation of the critical/philosophical axis of argumentation. This fragmentation of philosophical and critical lines of thought was perceptively predicted (and denounced ahead of time) by Richard Wyn Jones in 2001,³⁹ and by and large seems to have been verified by recent developments.

This is not all, however, for many theorists are also severely affected by wider structural confines. The structural confines of current academia, and of society at large, are arguably defined by the material and ideological hegemony of liberal capitalism, and this hegemony affects critical theorists and meta-theorists in a myriad of ways.

Hegemonic Structures

Critical theorists – Gramsci and Marcuse, for example – were interested in investigating the curious role of the academic in modern industrial society. While acknowledging the important role of academics in the production of change, they were also cognisant of the many limitations that exist on the academic consciousness and action in society due to the dominant societal forces at work around them. It was no surprise for these authors when academics failed in their critical role and in fact came to reproduce the dominant mores of totalitarian capitalist consciousness. This was in some regards inevitable in the age of conformity and in the context of productive and ideological forces that punish alternative thinking and push people towards practical instrumental problem-solving knowledge production within the existing system.

Their scepticism of the abilities of academics to overcome the structural hegemony of liberal capitalism is worth keeping in mind; not only in relation to our judgements of the capabilities of 'mainstream' scientific analyses to shift in focus, but also in relation to the so-called critical end of social-scientific theorisation. As Wyn Jones powerfully reminds

39. Richard Wyn Jones, 'Introduction', 15.

us, the academics are not immune from the powers of societal forces and this may hinder their ability to effectively challenge the current political or social order and to maintain a united front against hegemonic forces.⁴⁰ Not only do the pressures towards conformist and output-oriented research get channelled into workings of academia through external social pressures, but media, culture and socio-economic pressures too feed into the consciousness of critical academics (almost?) as much as they do that of any other person.

Perhaps wider structural forces, in the world economy and in academia, are, then, disabling the critical voices, rendering them apparently 'pointless' and 'outdated' in today's society. There is some plausibility to this reading I think – note the (still) oft-repeated statements on the effect of globalisation and victory of capitalism as a context for left politics today (a self-fulfilling prophecy as Hay and Marsh have shown!⁴¹). In the context of the wider victory of capitalist and liberal politics, it is difficult even for critics to challenge the freedom-inducing power of these ideas – an attraction that Marcuse well documented as a key characteristic of a one-dimensional society, and Foucault has well described in his later work on governmentality through governing of 'freedom'. In such a context, to rile against the reason of freedom is not only silly and pointless – and thus not only a waste of money – but also potentially dangerous in endangering core liberal freedoms. Certainly, in the case of analysing democracy promotion, such a triumphalist discourse still plays a surprisingly effective role in sidelining critical thinking.

Strategic Failures

While accepting the role of structural 'hegemonic' forces on academics, some point to strategic or partially voluntary failings of their efforts. Murphy, for example, not only points out the more emancipatory and democratic, in some respects, credentials of earlier non-critical IR theorists, such as E.H. Carr, Niebuhr or even behaviouralist peace researchers in the 1960s, but also damningly states that 'unlike early scholars ... contemporary critical theorists have offered little programmatic input into the political practice of egalitarian social movements'.⁴² He points to, but also recognises, the unpalatable flavour of Susan Strange's 'unwelcome advice' that theorists in IR should "get on with it" by doing empirical research either to find the relevant levers of power for the disadvantaged or to persuasively conclude that no such levers exist'.⁴³ This challenge, he suggests, is so uncomfortable for critical theorists in IR because within the academic discipline it is actually 'quite comfortable for critical scholars to be detached from the social movements' that seek change.⁴⁴ This failure could be read as structural, or even as a failing of critical theory itself. Yet, it could also be argued that it is primarily a strategic failure by critical theorists.

Academics it is argued should be, and have to be, strategic in what they do;⁴⁵ they should seek appropriate spheres of effecting change and do so in a reflective,

40. Wyn Jones, 'Introduction', vii.

41. Colin Hay and David Marsh, eds, *Demystifying Globalisation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

42. Murphy, 'Critical Theory', 61.

43. Strange, quoted in Murphy, 'Critical Theory', 75.

44. Murphy, 'Critical Theory', 75.

45. See Murphy, 'Critical Theory'.

if provocative, manner. But if this is the case, surely critical theorists have failed on a massive scale, and so have the advocates of reflexivity and alternative meta-theoretical frameworks that challenge positivism.⁴⁶ One of my key concerns in this regard is that while theoretical insights grow, few of these are placed in the context of analysing and attacking *concrete practices of positivism* in world politics. The positivism rife in current policy practice is left by and large uncriticised and unchallenged, while academic criticisms ‘move on’ to deal with specific theoretical points of argumentation. In democracy promotion, for example, but also in global governance more generally, positivism and objectivism play a crucial role – ideologically and politically. These should and could be interrogated and challenged by critical theoretical and philosophical voices today.

While increasingly successful in winning small victories in the academic funding and research games (no doubt far from insignificant in maintaining some relevance for critical theory today), it is not evident that adequate successes in transforming global political environments emerge from the critical theorists’ current strategic moves in the present hegemonic context. Strategic moves to bring critical theory to light remain confined by and large to academia. Depoliticisation of academia and fragmentation of knowledge production promulgate this form of ‘forgetting’ about the ‘real world’: academics become more interested in petty abstract debates than getting involved and uniting in effecting real change in concrete developments. To be fair, Habermas and Derrida, as well as Žizek, have been very active in getting involved in everyday issues, and have thus also sought to overcome typical theoretical divides. Such figures are relatively rare in critical and philosophical IR.

To do something about this we need to realise the constraints of context (hegemony), but also to honestly recognise and face up to the failures of strategy as well as structural constraints and work to re-politicise and re-concretise critical and philosophical work in IR.

Re-politicisation of Critical and Philosophical Inquiry in IR

I cannot here reflect exhaustively on the kinds of things that should and could be done to revive the fortunes of critical philosophical thinking in IR or in world politics. Also, the limits of change and the complexity of strategic action need to be recognised. Yet, I argue that there are three things we can pay more attention to.

Firstly, we could try to re-politicise our own philosophical and empirical research, or at least more openly reflect on the political leanings that may be embedded within our own frameworks. I think there is a great deal more we can do to bring out – explicitly – the political effects of the specific epistemological or philosophical choices we make in our research. Secondly, we could, at least in part, reorient it towards practice and thereby seek reunification or a bringing together of different critical and philosophical strands of thought. This is something that others too have called for,⁴⁷ and something which could be used as a basis for moving away from fragmented and towards more dialogical

46. Rosenberg, ‘International’; Smith, ‘Rearranging the Deckchairs’.

47. Owen Worth, ‘The Poverty and Potential of Gramscian Thought in International Relations’, *International Politics* 45 (2008): 633–49; Wyn Jones, ‘Introduction’.

critical and philosophical theory. Thirdly, we could reorient critical and philosophical thought towards future-oriented thinking. Given that these three suggestions are all somewhat abstract without a concrete context, I will reflect here briefly on how these three themes can be brought out more evocatively in the context of my own current research on democracy promotion.

Reflecting on and Declaring Commitments

Firstly, in terms of re-politicisation, there is much to be done in explicitly declaring the political and normative leanings embedded in one's research agenda. Indeed, despite having been a philosophy of science and critical theory specialist for some time, my own work is replete with failings in this regard. For me, what this would mean is systematic acknowledgement of the normative and political leanings that exist in the conceptual apparatus we work with, in my case of the broadly critical realist philosophical research agenda. Having failed to recognise the politics of my work previously, I have sought to do better recently by having clearly stated the importance of challenging positivist criteria for knowledge-making and the importance of a 'critical theoretical sensibility' in my current concrete lines of inquiry on democracy promotion. My view on the aim of empirical study, I now openly acknowledge (to both my European Union funders and the wider audience), is rather different from the one advocated by many in the mainstream of my current empirical research agenda: it is deliberately politically motivated and normative; and seeks (although does not assume) power structures at the level of institutions and social structures, as well as (more imperceptible) at the level of discourse. My approach to the empirical study of democracy promotion is aimed at levelling a base-level political critique towards the depoliticising and ideology-disguising positivist studies – and practices! – in democratisation and democracy promotion, dominant at present in the field. This reveals to us new aspects of democracy promotion: the role of 'implicit liberal ideology' in structuring democracy promotion practice, even of non-governmental organisation (NGO) actors, today.

Yet, politicisation of philosophical foundations and thereby empirical research, I think, also has to recognise the complex politics of philosophical foundations: it should not be simplistic and ideologically single-minded. For example, in democracy promotion practices, we have to note that positivism as a base-philosophy of practice plays an important role not just in partly delimiting options and room for debate on the meaning of democracy, but also in advancing certain kinds of progressive politics in facilitating the operationalisation of some useful and emancipatory forms of democracy promotion. The choice of philosophical foundations may be political, but the politics of choice in philosophical foundations are not simple or easy. Critical and philosophical research in IR should be prepared to deal with the complex politics of the philosophy of science in the real world of world politics.

Reorienting towards Practices

Secondly, in terms of reorienting research more towards analysis of concrete practices, this too is a difficult exercise: more so than one would expect on the basis of abstract critiques. Firstly, it is difficult because seeking empirical reorientation to objects of

study is partly a dangerous move: critical and philosophical research in important respects is precisely about removing analysis from the ‘coal-face’ of practice in order to present new opportunities for thinking about alternatives. Yet, it still presents an important challenge and, as a result, I have tried to face up to it recently. This is partly because, at present, critical analyses of democracy promotion can be too easily dismissed as too abstract and too driven by theoretical assumptions; to the point that they miss the problem with real-world practices of democracy promotion. Richard Youngs’ critique of critical democracy promotion scholarship and its empirical failures is crucial to note here.⁴⁸ It is indeed true that some of the critical theoretical work tends to be sloppy in relation to empirics.⁴⁹ The same is the case with philosophical investigations of the basis of democratisation research; the consequences of philosophical orientations to real-world practice should be shown.⁵⁰

Yet, reorientations can take place in this regard: we can render critical theory interventions more empirically and concretely plausible. Yet, in developing these interventions, what has been interesting is the realisation that much wider than usual critical theoretical lenses are necessary to make sense of empirical realities and practices. As a result, in recent years neo-Gramscian and Foucauldian lines of thought have developed simultaneously in my research and they speak to each other in a very close and productive manner. Interestingly, as a consequence of the concretisation of critical and philosophical research, theoretical ‘fighting points’ between different strands of critical and philosophical literature seem to recede to the sidelines.⁵¹

The other aspect of concretisation of research means talking, if possible, more closely to policymakers and other political actors involved in the field of study, even if not to make ‘instrumental’ policy recommendations (that endanger the critical edge of theoretical or philosophical premises). My own approach has involved engagement that has highlighted politicisation of the practices that the actors are involved in. Such an involvement in the practices of core actors and policymaking figures is, in my experience, beneficial in terms of gaining better insight into practice constraints as well as better avenues for impact. Yet, at the same time, I of course acknowledge that there are limits to progressive change impacted through these means: it is acknowledged that some kinds of change will never result from direct interaction with dominant actors (e.g. in our case through US or EU democracy promotion frameworks), yet, even in such cases, engagement with social movements and think tanks can be a fruitful alternative. At present, the project work I am engaged in seeks to figure out where the best levers for change are in the complex global democracy promotion scene; to answer Susan Strange’s call for meaningful and concrete critical theory, we are in the process of trying to understand whether and where such levers can be located through more accurate empirical readings and the closer engagement of concrete actors involved in the practices.

48. Youngs, ‘Misunderstanding’.

49. Jeff Bridoux, ‘It’s the Political, Stupid’: national vs transnational perspectives on democratisation in Iraq’, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 15 (4): 552–571.

50. Milja Kurki, ‘Critical Realism and the Analysis of Democratisation: Does Philosophy of Science Matter?’, in *Scientific and Critical Realism in International Relations*, ed. Jonathan Joseph and Colin Wight (London: Palgrave, 2010), 129–47.

51. Worth, ‘The Poverty’.

Future-oriented Concrete Utopias

Such interaction involves research that is realistic but also utopian and 'future-oriented' at the same time. Indeed, I agree with Heikki Patomäki's recent call for future-oriented IR and politics research.⁵² This involves not only engaging negatively with the past, but also thinking positively of possible future openings and possibilities. Crucially, thinking in such terms importantly means not only prioritising 'self-reflexivity', but also engaging 'stakeholders', including the public and the policy elites. Such research has its dangers of not only 'proselytising' but also of becoming bewitched by the 'siren-call' of 'policy relevance'; yet it is also wrong to assume, as some critical theorists do, that putting concrete suggestions on the table in engaging with policymakers is necessarily dangerous. From my own recent engagements with democracy promotion, it seems that the best friend of a critically minded academic can surprisingly often be a critically minded policymaker, if only they have concrete future actions and possibilities (even rather radical ones) to discuss. Future-oriented critical scholarship should keep its mind open to the critical engagement of both NGO and policy actors and remain attuned to the few openings that do exist in policy practice for progressive and emancipatory politics.

It is not my aim to argue that the recommendations here solve the problems of critical and philosophical IR research. Yet, I would like to suggest that certain kinds of re-politicisation, re-concretisation and reorienting of philosophical and critical research can be productive, at least for individual research projects. I call here for somewhat more 'positive' critical theoretical work – a challenge that some critical theorists might wish to criticise, conceiving as they might do the aim of critical theorising to be merely negative. While different readings of the role of critical theory are of course to be acknowledged, it may still be advisable to remind ourselves that for some critical theorists the point of theory was not just to analyse the world but to change it and that this may still present a challenge worth taking up today.

Conclusion

We have yet another call to a new beginning, another meta-theoretical debate for the consumers of international relations theory. This is the easy part, and I support it as far as it goes. However, now it is time to move beyond introductions and openings to concrete applications, to the construction and illustration of viable alternatives. It is important that we proceed in this manner not because these alternatives are necessarily going to be 'better', closer to 'truth' or more 'real' in some sense than prevailing theoretical explanations; but in order to demonstrate the possibility of alternative – possibly, but not necessarily, superior – conceptualisations, that are otherwise widely held to be self-evident by the vast majority of scholars of IR.⁵³

There have been many calls for more critical and philosophical debate in IR; yet, just how critical are all these debates and what effects do they have? What is the purpose of critical IR theory or philosophical reflection, and what is the purpose of the

52. Heikki Patomäki, *The Political Economy of Global Security* (London: Routledge, 2009).

53. Biersteker, 'Critical Reflections', 266.

supposed theoretical diversity that the critical voices bring into IR? Many, in my view, misunderstand their purpose. Biersteker summarises my own view perfectly. The point of philosophical reflection and post-positivism, he argues, is not to provide 'pluralism without purpose, but a *critical* pluralism, designed to reveal embedded power and authority structures, provoke critical scrutiny of dominant discourses, engage marginalised peoples and perspectives and provide a basis for alternative conceptualisations'.⁵⁴ There is a purpose to critical theory that needs to be acknowledged, reflected upon and 'practised'; both inside and outside academia. At present, it seems to me that relatively little such engagement takes place; not because critical theorists are 'lazy' or wrong-headed, but because the disciplinary environment and professional structures favour disassociation and depoliticisation even of these strands of thought. Strategic thinking of critical theorists is not missing, but it is oriented in such a way that does not facilitate real-world political changes. In the era of the expansion of the image of *homo oeconomicus* in academia too, much remains to be done in reinvigorating critical theoretical thought. At present, we have many theoretically sophisticated but practically disinvested scholars. This renders IR, and especially philosophical and critical theory within it, rather useless in challenging global structures and paradigms of domination.

But what can we do about this? Arguably, revisions of conceptual categories and their political underpinnings, as well as spaces to think about alternatives, are needed more than ever. But how do we generate them, or, in Cox's or Murphy's words, how can IR academics help in generating such alternatives? We can do so in a few ways. We can do so by passing on the torch by continuing to teach critical theory: as Hoffman usefully reminds us, theorising itself (and passing it on through teaching) is a critical practice in itself.⁵⁵ We can also do so today by continuing to fight the cuts to social science research in universities and the constriction of space for free thought within universities. We can also seek to obtain, but also seek to reshape, the kind of research funding that is provided by funding councils or states. This takes some perseverance, for it is not easy to argue for conceptual or philosophical engagement, let alone critical praxeology, at a time of crisis or for reform within bureaucratic and conservative structures. Yet, this brings in another core aspect of the challenge faced by critical theorists, which is that we must also seek to engage with the world: to act in it as well as analyse it. We must engage the social groups and NGOs, but also the elites and bureaucrats. We can do so and we must try and do so; partly because these elites (and also NGO elites) are actually more well-meaning and even reflective than many academics give them credit for; and because, in my experience, they are very capable of understanding both the pros and cons, limits and possibilities, of alternative frameworks and actions when concretely presented with them. This is not to say that significant structural and ideological constraints do not exist to generating alternative political scenarios – they do – but the structures are only partly, and in many cases only secondarily, supported, even by governmental or intergovernmental elites. These elites may be a good ally, rather than an enemy, in re-shifting international political and economic paradigms.

54. Biersteker, 'Critical Reflections', 264, emphasis in original.

55. Hoffman, 'Critical Voices'.

The result of a new kind of engagement with the empirical and the practical is not necessarily a victory of critical theory; critical theory rarely – indeed never, it would seem – ‘wins’, that much is a clear lesson of history. Yet, it can occasionally activate, motivate and, indeed, ‘enthral’ people, as well as giving them hope and impetus to achieve change. Despite its sceptical outlook, critical and philosophical theory is still valuable in reminding us that, while it does not seem so, we do not live in a world without any alternatives.

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